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New Histories of Marriage and Politics in Africa

Emily Lynn Osborn, *Our New Husbands Are Here. Households, Gender, and Politics in a West African State from the Slave Trade to Colonial Rule* (Athens Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2011), pp. xiii + 273. ISBN 978 0 8214 1983 0 (pb); 978 0 8214 4397 2 (electronic).

Rachel Jean-Baptiste, *Conjugal Rights. Marriage, Sexuality and Urban Life in Colonial Libreville, Gabon* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2014), pp. xiii + 300. ISBN 978 0 8214 2120 8 (pb); 978 0 8214 2119 2 (hb); 978 0 8214 4503 7 (electronic).

Emily S. Burrill, *States of Marriage. Gender, Justice, and Rights in Colonial Mali* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2015), pp. xiv + 239. ISBN 978 0 8214 2145 1 (pb); 978 0 8214 2144 4 (hb); 978 0 8214 4514 3 (electronic).

The three books reviewed in this article make an important contribution to Africa's social and political history. Defying explorations of marriage as a product of the political economy and avoiding a consideration of marriage simply as an example of social or legal transformation, Emily Lynn Osborn, Rachel Jean-Baptiste and Emily Burrill focus on marriage, sexual relations and the household as important and contested categories of historical production. Their emphasis on the implication of marriage in wider social relationships resonates with historical-anthropological reconstructions of precolonial and colonial forms of gendered agency.[1] It also reveals marriage as a vantage point for research that transcends conceptual boundaries between the private and the political, and by implication also boundaries between different fields of historical inquiry.

The authors' shared emphasis on marriage as a 'messy engagement', embedded in family relationships, social obligations, and political interests [Burrill 2015: 158], makes for fascinating reading. Osborn's book was published first, and as both Jean-Baptiste and Burrill engage directly with it, the following section provides an overview of the books and their main arguments in order of

publication. The third section considers future areas of study suggested by the distinct concerns and approaches of the authors. Focusing on the authors' engagement with emotion and their use of oral sources, the fourth and fifth sections discuss some of the conceptual and methodological challenges and opportunities arising for future historians of marriage in Africa.

Histories of marriage by Osborn, Jean-Baptiste and Burrill

Drawing on field work in the westernmost part of the African continent, Emily Lynn Osborn argues that the wider history of the Milo River Valley, now Guinea-Conakry, can only be understood if the boundary between the political and the private is historicized. Exploring the relationship between households and state-making in the polity of Kankan-Baté, Osborn traces the co-evolution of both institutions from the 1650s to the colonial period. Complementing her archival material with a large body of oral sources, she explains that the myths and stories surrounding the foundation of Kankan-Baté by a Muslim cleric point to the power of wives, mothers and sisters to undermine household unity, and by extension male agency, through disrespectful or immoral behavior. Because male achievement relied on female support, marriage ties helped both to consolidate and expand the polity [23-48].

However, as Kankan-Baté increasingly engaged in long-distance trade and eventually in warfare during the eighteenth and nineteenth century, households expanded through slavery and women's lives were increasingly defined by their relative status within them [49-91]. This tendency found its apogee in the extended household of Samori Touré, who occupied Kankan-Baté from 1881-91 and whose household contained several thousand slaves [92-112]. In stark contrast to the marital economy associated with local state-making, the ideologies of the French colonial state did not share ideas about wealth in people and instead emphasized the distinction between private and political [115-140]. Moreover, racist notions of French superiority meant that the marriages and marriage-like relationships of colonial officials with African women tended to be perceived as potentially dangerous. The colonial emphasis on the private nature of marriage meant that emancipation was often withheld from slaves who were concubines or married to their masters [141-177].[2] Osborne

concludes that any discussion of gendered political engagement must also explore women's domestic roles [186].

Rachel Jean-Baptiste's study of colonial Libreville focuses on marriage not primarily as a practice that enables the constitution of households but as a part of the region's complex sexual economy. Tracing the evolution of heterosexuality and marital practices primarily among the locally prominent Mpongwé and Fang groups from the foundation of Libreville in 1849 to the end of the colonial period in 1960, Jean-Baptiste explains how marriage relates to the changing sexual and emotional regimes that define masculinity and femininity [1-20]. In many local contexts, marriage did not equate with exclusive sexual relations but rather with the control of sexual access, and marriage enabled husbands to allow other men to have intimate relations with their wife or wives [23-43]. In the early twentieth century marriage also became increasingly important for control over children [44-133]. Among the Fang, who were mainly engaged in agriculture and thus dependent on manual labour, children born before the completion of bridewealth payments were increasingly claimed by mothers or mothers' natal families [134-161]. But the transformation of marriage in Libreville also facilitated the monetization of female domestic, emotional, and sexual roles [162-193]. As the town expanded, many Mpongwé women entered shorter-term marriages to French and other European residents.

The focus on sexuality and affectivity allows Jean-Baptiste to engage with current debates about inter-racial sexuality,[3] and to turn Osborn's reflections on the implications of such relationships on their head: instead of exploring what inter-racial liaisons meant for the colonial state or indeed the French Empire, it allows her to describe what such marriages meant for (some) African women. In Libreville, the senior men and women who arranged short-term marriages to benefited in the short term because they received the bridewealth. However, the short-term nature of these marriages often greatly empowered the women who were in them, because, on the departure of their European husbands, they inherited the ownership of a shared house and possessions. Subject neither to paternal nor marital control, such women often retained custody of their children and enjoyed their inherited wealth [194-216].

Returning to West Africa, Emily Burrill's study of legal interventions in marriage in colonial Sikasso in southern Mali emphasises the contested nature of marriage over the course of the colonial period. Reading the documents produced in marriage and divorce cases both along and against the grain, Burrill explores the transformation of marriage as a colonial project in which ostensibly local practices were rendered 'legible' through documentation, codification and debate [1-23]. While the changing legal judgments in court cases dealing with marital breakdown reflect evolving colonial strategies, they also illuminate local struggles. In Sikasso, a clear distinction between slaves and wives was not always possible, and early judgments in marital cases emphasized the customary (and Islamic) obligations of men, such as the payment of bridewealth and the injunction on abandonment or severe physical punishment, in granting divorces [25-78]. However, by the First World War marital judgments reveal increasing sympathy for husbands. As colonial conscription, forced labour, and taxation often undermined men's ability to establish themselves, support for patriarchal authority within marriage was meant to maintain social stability [79-105].

The focus on state involvement in shaping marriage allows Burrill to complicate Osborn's argument that the colonial state was built on the strict separation of the personal from the political. Building on debates within African legal history that recognize disputes over marriage as a key element of the codification of customary law,[4] Burrill points out that the Malian state re-ordered the private – here marriage – both to assign recognizable categories of household units to colonial subjects and to create consent for the state. As legal judgements were increasingly codified according to ethnicity and religion, administrators debated to what degree marriage practices were compatible with French civilization.

The 1939 Mandel decree emphasized the importance of individual female consent for the validity of marriage and thus gave some women the opportunity to challenge their marriage arrangements and to make their own decisions [107-133]. The growing importance of individual consent often led to a greater investment of men in the production of documents that confirmed it. However, an insistence on consent could mean the loss of kinship ties for women who defied their elders [153-178]. Burrill's

analysis illustrates that as long as the production of individual consent sits uneasily with the interpersonal relationships that 'make' marriages, it remains problematic [179-185], and thus also contributes to ongoing debates about forced marriages and sexual slavery in Africa and beyond.

Marriage as a vantage point for the study of African gendered political histories

Examining marriage, sexuality and the household in very different localities in West and Central Africa, the three books illustrate how marriage as an institution was shaped by the discrete gendered and sexual economies that pre-existed and accompanied colonial rule. The social relations produced by marriage in different parts of French West Africa varied considerably: in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Kankan-Baté, marriage bonds attracted and integrated migrant Muslim men and contributed to the polity's peaceful expansion by glossing over differences of ethnicity and origin [Osborn 56-59]. By contrast, marital practices validated and enforced ethnic and religious differences in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Sikasso [Burrill 26, 79]. In colonial Libreville, intermarriage was productive of social formations that included Europeans, whose short-term 'African marriages' were almost exclusively to Mpongwé women [Jean-Baptiste 194-204].

In all three localities, the colonial state's intervention in marriage had significant effects on the gendered political economy, which was shaped by the inability (or unwillingness) to separate marriage from slavery and servitude, the monetization of the economy, and the recognition of bridewealth as the legal basis for local forms of marriage. As all the books under review focus on patrilineal societies where women only held exceptional positions of authority before colonial rule, and which were part of the French Empire, they offer an interesting contrast to histories of marriage in societies with different gendered, political and lineage structures, or governed by other colonial powers.[5] Moreover, an extension of the approaches pioneered here into the post-colonial and contemporary period would offer a valuable contribution to the further and comparative study of Africa's gendered political histories.

But the authors' emphasis on the importance of marriage for wider social relationships also points to other areas of future research. Partly reflecting the nature of the sources consulted, but perhaps also the difficulty of determining the limits of who is (or should be) part of a marriage, the discussion of marriage and power in all three books centers on the relationships between parents/ elders and children/ younger people, and between husbands and wives. As all the authors acknowledge, this means that other relationships integral to marriage, such as those between co-wives, between women and their (and other women's) children, and between wives and in-laws are explored in less detail. A closer examination of motherhood, often central to female self-realisation, would have added further depth to the understanding of gendered forms of political agency.[6] This would also have avoided slippage in Osborn's discussion of the household, originally a statistical and economic category developed and refined in the context of European and North American monogamous normativity. Future historians of marriage may want to engage with the extensive anthropological and sociological debate about polygynous households, and take account of the fact that many women form domestic units with their children around different hearthholds.[7]

African histories of emotion

Jean-Baptiste's study of Libreville focuses explicitly on the complexity and malleability of the emotional dispositions associated with marriage over time, but emotion features, albeit at a secondary level, in the two other books reviewed here too. This may well reflect the productivity of an approach that understands the distinction between private and public as historically contingent. Largely independently of each other, all three authors confirm Cole and Thomas's assertion that in Africa as elsewhere, 'ideologies of affect' exist in relation to wider social structures and are, at least within colonial states, an integral part of the exercise of power.[8] Paying close attention to the locally rooted pressures on marriage, they also explore emotions as closely associated with shared residence, sexual and familial intimacy, and physical experiences including violence.

Two examples illustrate the wide range of emotions associated with marriage and sexuality in the colonial context. Burrill's exploration of female complicity in the constitution of 'normal' levels of

male domestic violence also illuminates the forms of emotional control that constituted community at the level of compounds and villages. And yet the involvement of parents, co-wives and even neighbours in the resulting disputes also point to the importance of friendship and affection in many marital arrangements [134-52]. Exploring changing male vulnerabilities, Jean-Baptiste explains that in 1940s and 1950s Libreville, many Fang men who did not have the resources to marry measured their masculinity not in having sex but in their restraint from it. Thus an unmarried man coaxed into heterosexual intercourse would consider himself violated, and suffer both as result of the traumatic nature of the experience and the ensuing mockery [168-72].

Beyond Osborn's description of the welcoming attitude towards Muslims in Kankan-Baté, based on the consideration of all Muslim immigrants as worthy of marriage to women from the region [56-59], the authors do not elaborate on the importance of religious discourse for the constitution of emotional dispositions. Yet it is implicit from all books that widely shared understandings about appropriate relationships between husbands and wives, between co-wives, and between parents and children emerged not only in the engagement with the colonial and postcolonial state, but in complex social constellations that were also shaped by the spread of Islam and/ or Christianity.[9]

At the same time, Osborn's reliance on use of the Kankan-Baté word *fudunyolu* to describe the practice of welcoming fellow Muslims through marriage also illustrates the limits of translation. Jean-Baptiste describes other limits of language in noting that her interview respondents did not, or could not, respond to questions about same-sex physical intimacy and homosexual encounters [170]. Clearly the exploration of emotional histories in Africa takes place in the context of multiple translations between religious and secular forms of knowledge, between vernacular and academic languages, and between physical experience and expression. If such considerations point to the difficulties of studying changing emotions in Africa, they are not out of place in other contexts and suggest ways in which the study of Africa may contribute to future work in this field.

Future directions in the use of African oral sources?

Each of the books reviewed is remarkable for a sophisticated reading of colonial records, which largely reflects the distinction between public and private, in the context of the concerns and conventions that surrounded their production. As the only historian who explores gendered agency in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, Osborn also makes the audacious decision to take the region's oral narratives seriously. While she acknowledges that the concerns of the present shape all oral sources, she rightly contends that this does not necessarily invalidate their historical content [13-18]. Exploring historical narratives relating to different periods, she demonstrates convincingly that the representation of female agency in relation to state and household changes dramatically over time. Undoubtedly the depth and range of both Jean-Baptiste's and Burrill's work are also improved by their engagement with oral texts in the form of historical narratives and interviews.

Osborn's careful yet determined use of oral historical narratives has been largely welcomed, although her sometimes literal reading of 'what are after all highly symbolic texts' has been noted by Barbara Cooper.[10] In a similar vein, Jan Jansen argues that the 'coded' nature of the texts studied by Osborn means that their discussion of women does not reflect the actual agency of women but simply offers lessons about lineage politics.[11] Given that Osborn argues that women in seventeenth and eighteenth century Kankan-Baté were powerful not because they could make alliances but because they could un-make them, Osborn and Jansen may agree on more than they disagree.

Yet both Cooper's and Jansen's comments suggest that Osborn's interpretation of the oral material would have been stronger if she had considered her texts as historical instances of a particular genre or genres rather than simply as 'oral sources'. In all societies, different textual genres offer distinctive and contrasting conceptualisations of history and the past, and a close reading of the historical material they offer is likely to be most successful where the reader is familiar with the contexts in which particular forms of texts are produced, disseminated and interpreted. This understanding certainly informs historical readings of different kinds of written texts, but African oral texts are often discussed as if orality itself constituted them into one genre. Given the diversity of oral genres in most African societies that are potentially relevant to historical study, from historical narratives to personal

histories, songs, praise poetry, and proverbs, [12] future historians of marriage will do well to extend their understanding of genre to orality.[13]

Conclusion

In the past decades, marriage has attracted the attention of historians working on gender, slavery and servitude, and the law. However, with very few exceptions, these approaches did not focus on marriage as a central political practice and institution. By emphasizing that marriage and marital relationships (in the widest sense) are constitutive of a broad range of social and economic processes in Africa, Osborn, Jean-Baptiste and Burrill have mapped out an exciting field of study that builds on, and complements, these existing debates . Beyond that, their books suggest that the field offers great potential for further research, including comparative study, and they illustrate the potential for future work on marriage to consider interdisciplinary engagement and to pioneer conceptual and methodological innovation. The authors, and indeed their series editors and publishers, must be congratulated for this achievement.

Biographical note: Insa Nolte is Reader in African Studies at the University of Birmingham, UK. Her current ERC project explores how relations in Nigeria between Yoruba Muslims, Christians and traditionalists are anchored in social identities shaped by authority, generation and gender.

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[1] For a comprehensive introduction to different debates on gender in Africa, see Andrea Cornwall (ed.), *Readings in Gender in Africa* (Oxford: James Currey, 2005).

[2] This point has been explored from several angles in the literature on slavery and its aftermath. See for example Trevor Getz and Liz Clarke, *Abina and the Important Men: A Graphic History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[3] See also Carina Ray, *Crossing the Color Line: Race, Sex, and the Contested Politics of Colonialism in Ghana* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2015),

[4] Much of this debate builds on arguments proposed in Martin Chanock, *The Making of South African Legal Culture 1902-1936: Fear, Favour and Prejudice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

[5] The importance of marriage in enabling non-normative gendered lives is highlighted in Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands. Gender and Sex in an African Society* (London: Zed Press, 1987) and Lorand Matory, *Sex and the Empire That is No More: Gender and the Politics of Metaphor in Oyo Yoruba Religion* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1994). For a history of women and gender in a matrilineal society, see Jean Allman and Victoria Tashjian, *"I Will Not Eat Stone": A Women's History of Colonial Asante* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2000).

[6] Lorelle D. Semley, *Mother Is Gold, Father Is Glass: Gender and Colonialism in a Yoruba Town* (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 2010).

[7] Jane Guyer, 'Household and Community in African Studies', *African Studies Review* 24.2/3 (Jun-Sep 1981), pp. 87-137; Lynne Brydon and Sylvia Chant, *Women in the Third World: Gender issues in rural and urban areas* (Aldershot: Edward Elgar, 1989).

[8] Jennifer Cole and Lynn Thomas (eds), *Love in Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 5.

[9] For an excellent study of the transformation of marriage among the Christian elite of colonial Lagos, see Kristen Mann, *Marrying Well: Marriage, Status and Social Change among the Educated Elite in Colonial Lagos* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

[10] Barbara Cooper, Review of Emily Osborn, *American Historical Review* 117.5 (Dec 2012), pp.1705-6, 1706.

[11] Jan Jansen, 'When marrying a Muslim: The social code of political elites in the Western Sudan', *Journal of African History* Vol. 57 (2015), pp. 1-21, p. 16.

[12] Insa Nolte, 'Colonial politics and precolonial history: Everyday knowledge, genre, and truth in a Yoruba town', *History in Africa* Vol. 40.1 (2013), pp. 1-40.

[13] A foundational text on this topic is Karin Barber, *The Anthropology of Texts, Persons and Publics* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007).